

State wins clout over gas pipeline

U.S. agency OKs more inspections

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The federal Office of Pipeline Safety on Wednesday reversed an earlier decision and gave the Arizona Corporation Commission carte blanche to inspect Kinder Morgan Energy Partners' Arizona gasoline pipelines.

But the OPS also criticized the commission for not showing up to oversee a recent search for cracks along Kinder Morgan's 8-inch-diameter pipeline between Phoenix and Tucson. The commission says it was never notified that the work was under way.

Earlier this year, commissioners reacted angrily to the federal office's decision to approve only three days of on-site inspections of Kinder Morgan's Arizona pipelines.

The commission's Pipeline Safety Section, which inspects the lines under a contract with the OPS, had requested 20 days to do on-site inspections of Kinder Morgan's entire pipeline system in Arizona.

Arizona Corporation Commissioners Bill Mundell and Kris Mayes suggested that the OPS should approve more inspections in light of last summer's pipeline break near Tucson and asked the agency to reconsider the work plan.

On May 26, the OPS amended its 2004 work agreement to allow the commission to spend as much time as it needs inspecting the lines.

"This is a major victory for the people of Arizona," Mundell said.

Stacey Gerard, associate administrator of the OPS, said the agency had no intention of limiting the commission's inspections and amended the work plan to give the state inspectors more freedom.

But Gerard also criticized the state commission, saying inspectors were supposed to be on hand when Kinder Morgan dug up the Tucson-to-Phoenix pipeline looking for evidence of stress-corrosion cracking. Of the 28 excavations along the line, ACC inspectors witnessed only five.

As a result, there was no impartial verification of the company's findings, which turned up evidence of stress-corrosion cracking at just five of the test sites.

Stress-corrosion cracking was blamed for a the pipeline break last summer that caused fuel shortages in the Valley and prices that topped \$3 per gallon in some areas.

Gerard doesn't believe the lack of oversight will require more testing but said she is disappointed.

"I wanted to be able to say we saw it all," she said.

Arizona Corporation Commission spokeswoman Heather Murphy said the state inspectors were not present at the excavations because Kinder Morgan did not advise them the work was under way.

She added that the commission has cited Kinder Morgan for its failure to notify it of the time of the excavations.

"An Arizona inspector was at all site excavations that we were told about," Murphy said.